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ABSTRACT

The availability of serials through databases has provided libraries with a new format for acquiring information. The extent to which the growth in electronic databases can help the librarian control costs while meeting the demand of accrediting agencies was studied through an exploratory survey of the 48 specialized accrediting agencies of the Council on Postsecondary Education listed in two major directories. Thirty-nine agencies responded, and most indicated that no specific serials were stated as recommended or required in their accreditation standards. Most accrediting agencies depend on the visiting committee to identify and check the serials deemed necessary for effective program implementation. Six agencies did indicate that some serials are required or strongly recommended, identifying 61 serials. Most serials were found to be readily available in databases, and the potential cost savings of acquiring them through databases was found to be considerable even after online costs are estimated. This exploration indicates that libraries might profitably make more extensive use of serials in electronic format. Three tables present study findings. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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MEETING SERIALS REQUIREMENTS OF ACCREDITING AGENCIES THROUGH ELECTRONIC DATABASES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Introduction

The availability of serials through electronic databases has provided libraries with a new format for acquiring information at a lower cost and providing faculty and students with more information. From 1985 to 1990, the number of full text databases, many of which include serials, have increased from 535 to 1,786 (Williams 1991, xii). In fact, the number of full text databases has increased more than any other type of word-oriented database (Williams 1991, xiii). Many of the full text databases are available through major producers and vendors, such as Dialog and BRS. The producers and vendors store these databases in a format that is more permanent than paper. In addition, the databases in electronic format may be accessed through online, CD-ROM, or computer disk, and possibly by more than one user at a time. Furthermore, students and faculty are able to access information that may not be available to them in printed format.

There are several reasons that serial publications in electronic format have increased in availability and use. One reason is the budget problems that libraries are experiencing. Many libraries are faced with budget cuts and staff reduction,

while services and workload increase. Libraries struggle to maintain a collection of serials that serves the needs of the students and faculty. Thus, it is imperative for libraries to explore ways of meeting serials needs at a lower cost.

Besides the pressure from students and faculty to maintain an acceptable collection, accreditation agencies are assuming an increasing role in pressuring libraries to improve services and the collection. Federal, state, and local funding are dependent upon accreditation.As the number of accreditation agencies grows, and their influence expands, the strain on serials budgets for academic libraries will continue to increase.

Another factor is the rising cost of printed serial subscriptions. Libraries cannot afford to purchase all serials in printed format. For example, libraries in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have reduced the average number of subscriptions held by each library. In 1974, the average ARL library held 33 percent of all titles available in the "serials universe". In 1987, the number of titles decreased to just over 26 percent (Metz and Gherman 1991, 316). In addition, an increasing percentage of the library's budget is being allocated to serials. At Western Illinois University, the library's 1991 budget will allocate 75 percent to continuations (Goehner 1992, 9). To offset rising serial prices, libraries are moving away from the printed formats toward electronic databases. In 1991, Paul Gherman reported that Virginia Polytechnic Institute would be cutting the subscriptions budget by $300,000, and subscribing to several

electronic databases (Gherman 1991, A36).

For these reasons, libraries are moving towards electronic access as a means of obtaining and storing serials. They are potentially cheaper than the printed version. Also, electronic databases may provide access to locally and remotely accessed databases, improving the patron's ability to find more information.

Rationale for the Study

While costs associated with the acquisition of serials information continues to rise, the extent to which the growth in electronic databases can help the librarian control costs, while meeting the demands of accrediting agencies, is not clear. This study sought to explore this area. Not much information exists on how extensively expectations are expressed in accreditation standards issued by various specialized accrediting agencies. Sellen (1991) made observations on library standards of specialized accrediting agencies in the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA). Information is not available on the extent to which specialized accreditation agencies are favorably disposed toward the availability of serials only in electronic format. Leach (1992) examined how the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA) favors technological advancements in the library on the regional accreditation level.

Budget implications associated with these issues are self-evident. If electronic databases can be effectively utilized to meet the demands of accrediting agencies, potential savings can be

significant. It was with these considerations in mind that this study was conducted.

Research Questions

The study was designed to explore the possibility of providing serials in electronic rather than printed format, and still meet the requirements of accrediting agencies. If this is possible, then significant savings could result.

To guide the research, several research questions were formulated. These were:

1. Do accrediting agencies typically identify serials that should be available in the academic library if the program is to be accredited?

2. Are expectations concerning serial publications typically a part of accreditation standards, or do accreditation teams make independent judgements about the adequacy of the serials collection?

3. Are serials identified by accrediting agencies readily available through major database services?

4. Should librarians explore possible savings inherent in utilizing serials in electronic format as a means of satisfying accrediting agencies?

Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and sent to the forty-eight specialized accreditation agencies of the Council on Postsecondary

Education listed in Peterson's Guide to Graduate and Professional Programs (1991, 23-26) and The College Blue Book (1990, 695-741). The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter stating the purpose and importance of the study, and an offer to share the results of the study with the respondents. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was enclosed.

The questionnaire was addressed to the chief accreditation official of the accrediting agency. The official was asked if the agency required or strongly recommended that certain serials (periodicals, annuals, indices, etc.) be available before a program could be accredited. For those responding affirmatively, the accreditation officials were asked to list recommended or required serials, or send information from which they could be identified. This procedure produced a list of accrediting agencies and a corresponding list of required or strongly recommended serials.

The identified serials were analyzed in terms of database location, access cost, and subscription costs. These data are presented in the next section of this paper.

Results

This study was exploratory in nature. The purpose was to explore the feasibility of meeting accreditation standards for serials collections with access to serials in electronic, rather than printed, format. The study was not designed to produce normative data concerning the standards of any particular group of accrediting agencies, but rather to see if the study of

accreditation standards and electronic serials databases were feasible areas to study for potential cost savings. The results presented below provide useful information.

Table 1 indicates that thirty-nine of the forty-eight accreditation agencies contacted responded to the survey.

Table 1.--Number and Percent of Accrediting Agencies Identifying Specific Serials as Recommended or Required for Program Accreditation

Response	N	Percent
Yes	6	15.4
No	33	84.6
Total	39	100.0

No follow-up with non-respondents was attempted because the study was exploratory in nature and did not seek to establish normative data. Most of those responding (84.6%) indicated that no specific serials were stated as recommended or required in their accreditation standards. Undoubtedly, there are serials that are mandatory or recommended in every program of study because of their significance. The logical conclusion is that most accrediting agencies depend on the visiting committee to identify and check for serials deemed necessary for effective program implementation. Thus, further study in this area will need to go beyond published accreditation standards, and extended down to the visiting committee level, in order to identify required or strongly

recommended serials for each program seeking accreditation. The information will obviously need to be collected on an individual basis.

Six accrediting agencies identified specific serials that were required or strongly recommended. These agencies collectively identified a total of sixty-one serials. The researcher then located the database vendors that provided electronic access to these serials using Magazines for Libraries (1992) and Computer-Readable Databases (1991). Table 2 lists the electronic database vendors that provide the serials, along with the number of serials available through each vendor.

Table 2.--Electronic Database Vendors Providing the Recommended or Required Serials for Program Accreditation.

Vendor	N	Percent
BRS	27	44.3%
Dialog	26	42.6%
National Library of Medicine	13	21.3%
LEXIS/NEXIS	7	11.5%
Others (2 or less each)	16	26.2%

It can be noted that most of the serials are found in databases that are readily available. Table 3 presents information on printed subscription costs for the sixty-one serials identified in this study. The average annual subscription cost was $127.28.

When other costs are considered, the potential savings using

Table 3--Subscription Costs for Serials Identified as Recommended or Required for Program Accreditation

Cost	N	Percent
$0 - 100	41	67.2
101 - 200	11	18.3
201 - 300	0	0
Over 300	9	14.7

electronic databases would appear to be significant even after online costs are estimated.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Academic libraries must continue to seek ways of providing services at a reduced cost and still meet the standards of accrediting agencies. One possible way to stretch limited financial resources is the use of more information in an electronic format. Yet, increased use of serials in electronic format must not conflict with program accreditation standards. Very little information is available concerning the extent to which the use of serials in an electronic format satisfies accrediting agencies. Consequently, this exploratory study was done.

The results of this study indicate that most accrediting

agencies do not provide much information concerning serials requirements in their published accreditation standards. It must be assumed that program visiting committees are the entities that define expectations and make the final judgment concerning the adequacy of the serials collection. Further research will need to concentrate at the program review level to ascertain possible savings if libraries make more extensive use of serials in an electronic format.

This exploratory research does reflect a high probability that serials are readily available in electronic format. This availability removes one potential obstacle to the use of more serials in electronic format.

The potential for cost savings is difficult to determine. Certainly, assessing the total cost of a serial to a library over time is difficult. The variables are numerous. Perhaps even more difficult is estimating access cost over the same period of time. It is probable that in some circumstances, as in the case of low circulation, that access in electronic format is cost effective.

As a last consideration, the standards of the accrediting agencies must be assessed to assure that they have a rational view of the power and flexibility of electronic databases. These preliminary findings indicate that the issue of serials in an electronic, rather than printed format, has not been addressed by accreditation authorities. This is reflected by the lack of policy statements concerning the use of electronic databases in current, published accreditation standards.

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